

The Byzantine Empire

Prepare to Read

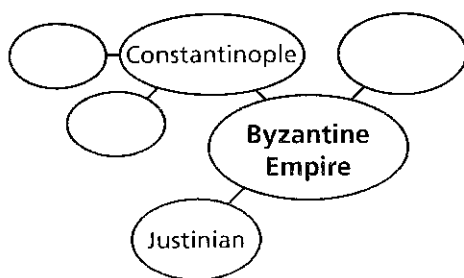
Objectives

In this section you will

1. Find out how Constantinople and the Byzantine Empire became powerful.
2. Discover the achievements of the Age of Justinian.
3. Learn about the later years of the Byzantine Empire.

Taking Notes

As you read this section, take notes about the Byzantine Empire's capital and rulers. Copy the concept web below and record your data in it.



Target Reading Skill

Preview and Set a Purpose

When you set a purpose for reading, you give yourself a focus. Before you read this section, look at the headings, photos, and illustrations to see what the section is about. Then set a purpose for reading, such as finding out about the city of Constantinople or the Byzantine Empire. Now read to meet your purpose.

Key Terms

- **Constantinople** (kahn stan tuh NOH pul) *n.* the capital of the eastern Roman Empire and later of the Byzantine Empire

- **Constantine** (KAHN stun teen) *n.* an emperor of the Roman Empire and the founder of Constantinople
- **Justinian** (jus TIN ee un) *n.* one of the greatest Byzantine emperors
- **Justinian's Code** (jus TIN ee unz kohd) *n.* an organized collection and explanation of Roman laws for use by the Byzantine Empire
- **schism** (siz um) *n.* a split, particularly in a church or religion



Greek fire being used in battle, as shown in a Byzantine manuscript

Prince Igor (EE gawr) of Kiev, which was then an important city in Russia, watched as a large force of his warships sailed across the Black Sea in A.D. 941. The prince was sure that Constantinople, capital of the Byzantine (BIZ un teen) Empire, would soon be his.

As his fleet drew close to the city, the prince's excitement turned to horror. Byzantine ships shot "Greek fire" at the invaders. Anything this "fire" touched burst into flames. Soon, most of Igor's fleet was ablaze. Water could not put out the flames.

Greek fire was made from a formula so secret that it was never written down. Even today, no one knows exactly how it was made, except that it contained petroleum. But this deadly weapon gave the Byzantines tremendous power throughout the Mediterranean area.

Constantinople at a Crossroads

At its height, the ancient Roman Empire controlled the lands surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. It also ruled parts of northern Europe and the region we now call the Middle East. In the centuries after Rome's power faded, these lands went through a tug of war. Two groups—the Christian Byzantines and the Muslim Arabs and Turks—developed powerful civilizations at this time. These two groups sometimes shared control and sometimes fought over the region.

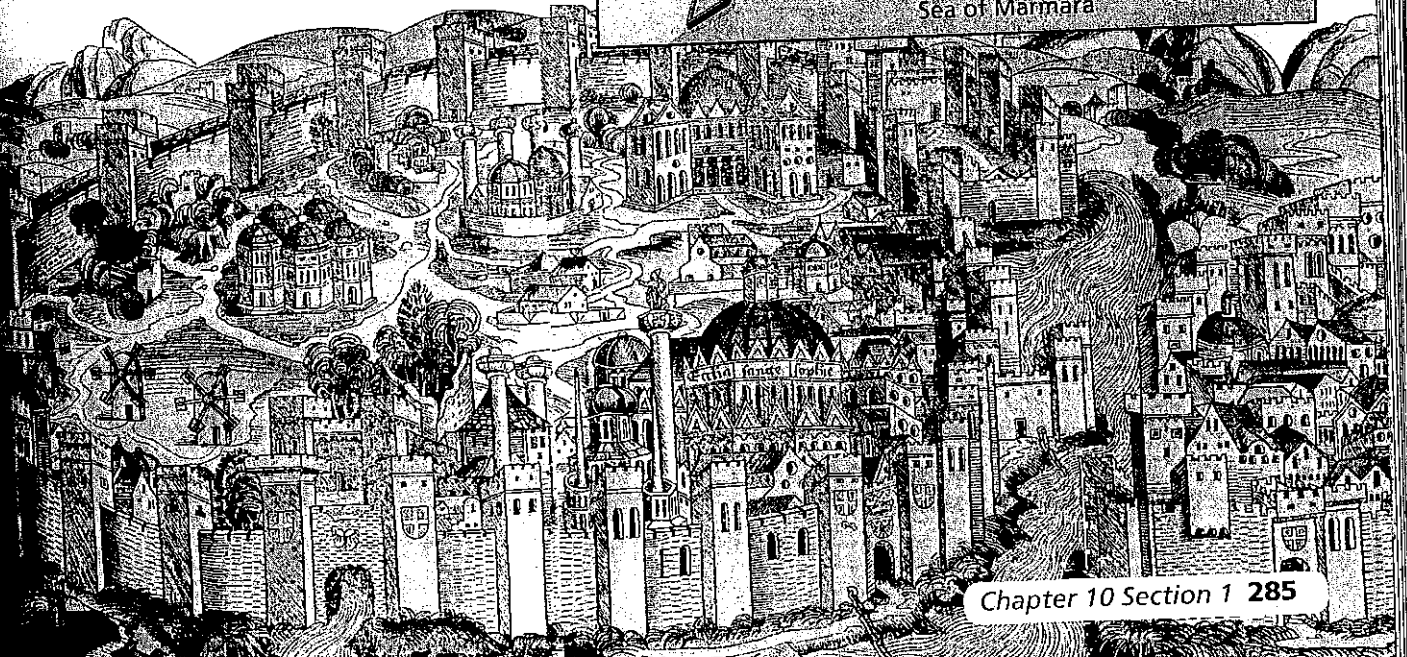
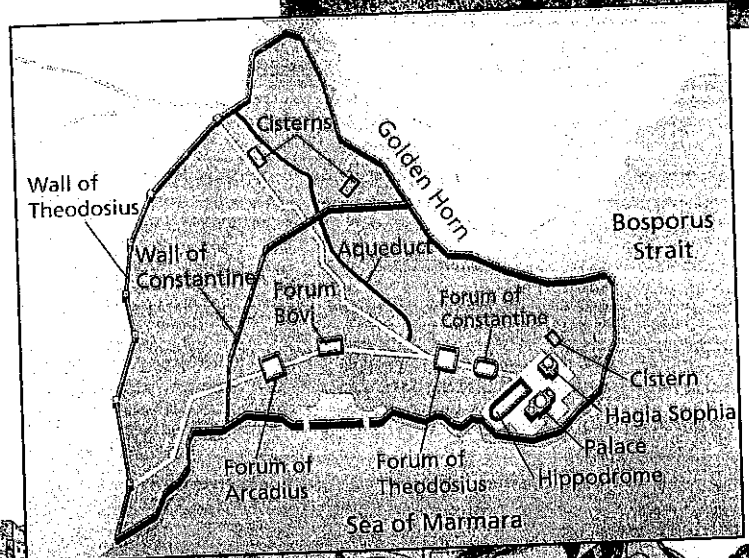
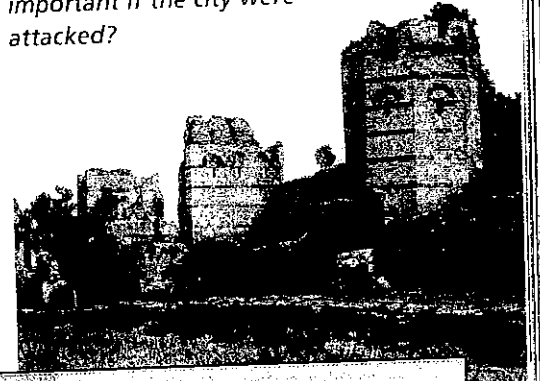
Constantine and His Capital The emperor Constantine began his rule of the enormous Roman Empire in A.D. 306. His reign was marked by two important changes. First, Constantine became a Christian and stopped the persecution of Christians in the empire. Second, after 20 years of ruling from the city of Rome, Constantine decided to build a new imperial capital.

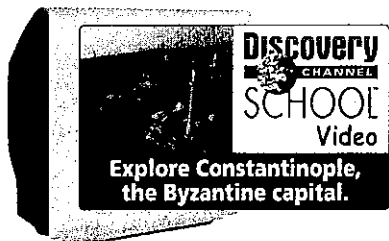
Constantine chose Byzantium, an ancient city founded by the Greeks, at the eastern end of the empire. He spared no expense building and fortifying his capital. In A.D. 330, Byzantium was renamed Constantinople (kahn stan tuh NOH pul), the “city of Constantine.” By the early 500s, Constantinople had large markets, forums or public squares, paved roads, a cathedral, a palace, public baths, and a hippodrome or circus. An estimated half a million people lived there. Although the name of their city had changed, the people who lived there were still called Byzantines.

Fortress City

Notice the walls that protect Constantinople in the medieval painting and in the diagram of the city. The photo shows ruins of a city wall.

Infer Why would the aqueduct, which carried water, and the cisterns, which stored water, also be important if the city were attacked?





Gold coin from Constantinople ►

Justinian and His Court

This work of art is a mosaic made of ceramic tiles fitted closely together.

Analyze Images How does the artist indicate that Justinian (center) is the most important person?



The emperors who followed Constantine continued to rule from Constantinople, in the eastern part of the empire. Over time, the Roman Empire split in two. The eastern half was by far the stronger. One reason for its strength was military. The Byzantines had the strongest army in the world. Another reason for the Byzantines' strength was trade.

Trade Constantinople was built at a major crossroads of land and sea trade routes. Find it on the map on page 283. Notice that it is located on the Bosphorus. The Bosphorus is a strait, or narrow passage that links two bodies of water. It connects the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara, which flows into the Mediterranean Sea. The Bosphorus also links two continents, Europe and Asia.

Goods came to Constantinople from Kiev in the north, from Egypt in the south, and across Central Asia from as far away as China. The Byzantines charged taxes on all goods that went through the city. The diverse people, goods, and ideas that poured into Constantinople made it a major center of international trade. And over time, the Byzantine Empire grew rich.

The Fall of the Western Empire Meanwhile, by A.D. 350, the western Roman Empire was already in decline. Roman armies were having difficulty holding back invaders from Europe. Germanic groups were coming closer and closer to Rome itself. In 476, a Germanic leader ousted the emperor. Historians call that event the fall of the Roman Empire.

✓ **Reading Check** Why did Constantinople become rich and powerful?

The Age of Justinian

As Rome was falling to invaders, strong fortifications and an excellent army protected Constantinople. But these were not the city's only strengths. The early Byzantine Empire had many excellent rulers who were wise as well as popular. They encouraged education and made reforms to laws and government. This kind of leadership also contributed to the strength of their empire.

The Emperor Justinian One of the greatest Byzantine emperors was Justinian (jus TIN ee un), whose rule began in 527. Justinian was an energetic ruler who rarely gave up on a task until it was completed. He had been born into a poor family, and he listened to the ideas of all his subjects—whether they were wealthy nobles or poor peasants.

Justinian's Code One of Justinian's most lasting contributions was a system of laws. When he became emperor, the empire was using a disorganized system of old Roman laws. Some laws even contradicted others. It was difficult to make sense of them—or to enforce them. Justinian appointed a team to collect and summarize centuries of Roman laws. The result was **Justinian's Code**, an organized collection and explanation of Roman laws for use by the Byzantine Empire. Eventually, this code became the basis for the legal systems of most modern European countries.

Byzantine Culture In addition to preserving the principles of Roman law, Byzantine scholars also kept and copied the works of the ancient Greeks. At its peak, Byzantine civilization blended Greek, Roman, and Christian influences. Later, when the empire was in decline, scholars took the ancient manuscripts and their knowledge of the rich Byzantine culture to the newly powerful city-states of Italy. In Chapter 15 you will read how these influences helped to spark the Renaissance.

✓ Reading Check What cultures influenced Byzantine civilization?

Citizen Heroes

Empress Theodora

Theodora (thee uh DAWR uh), empress of the Byzantine Empire, came from humble beginnings. Her father was a bearkeeper at Constantinople's Hippodrome, or circus. Theodora's marriage to Justinian gave her great power. Many of Justinian's decisions were made with her advice. Theodora worked to improve women's rights, and helped change divorce laws to protect women.

Hagia Sophia

It took 10,000 workers five years to build the Hagia Sophia cathedral in Constantinople. Since the fall of the empire, it has been used as a mosque. **Infer** Why do you think Justinian built such a majestic church?



Preview and Set a Purpose

If your purpose is to learn about the Byzantine Empire, how does the paragraph at the right help you meet your purpose?

The Importance of Icons

This icon shows the Virgin Mary and the baby Jesus. The ban on icons was finally lifted in A.D. 843, and they are important in Eastern Orthodox Christianity to this day. **Identify Frame of Reference** Why might medieval Christians have valued icons?



The Empire's Later Years

After Justinian's death in 565, the Byzantine Empire began to decline. Later emperors had to fight wars against many neighboring enemies—including Persians and Turks to the east, Arabs to the south, and Germanic peoples to the north and west. The Byzantine Empire was shrinking in both size and power. As the Byzantines struggled to keep nearby enemies from invading Constantinople, religious and political arguments were weakening the empire from within.

A Religious Dispute Although most Byzantines were Christians, they did not practice Christianity the same way as the people in Western Europe did. Byzantine Christians rejected the authority of the pope, the leader of the church in Rome. The Byzantine emperor had to approve the choice of the patriarch, or highest church official in Constantinople. Greek was the language of the Byzantine church, while Latin was the language of the Roman church. The two branches of Christianity began to grow apart.

At that time, many Christians prayed to saints or holy people, represented by icons, or paintings of these people. In the 700s, a Byzantine emperor outlawed the use of icons, saying that they violated God's commandments. The pope disagreed, and banished the emperor from the church.

Byzantines felt that the pope did not have the authority to banish the emperor from the church. These disputes led to a *schism*, or split, in the Christian church in 1054. Now there were two distinct forms of Christianity: the Roman Catholic Church in the west and the Eastern (Greek) Orthodox Church in the east.

A Second Golden Age From about 900 until the mid-1000s, the Byzantine Empire experienced a final period of greatness. Trade increased and merchants came to Constantinople from as far away as Venice and Russia. Once again the population of the city grew in size and diversity.

As the economy grew in strength, so did the government. The long reign of Basil II—from 976 until 1025—was the most exceptional period of Byzantine history since the rule of Justinian. The empire regained some of the land it had lost. There was a burst of creativity in the arts.

The Fall of Constantinople During the 1000s, however, Muslim peoples to the east were also gaining power. By the late 1100s, Turks had taken the inland areas of Asia Minor away from the weakening Byzantine Empire.

The Byzantines were also threatened by Europeans. In 1171, disagreements over trade led to a war with Venice. And in the early 1200s, Constantinople was attacked by Christian crusaders. Western Christians ruled the city for 50 years. In 1261, the Byzantines regained their capital, but little was left of their empire.

In 1453, a force of about 70,000 Turks surrounded Constantinople. They came both by sea and by land, and they brought cannons to attack the city's walls. The defending force, which numbered about 7,000, held out for two months. Then the Byzantine capital—which had been a defensive fortress for more than 1,000 years—finally fell.

However, like Constantine before them, the new rulers would rebuild the city and make it an imperial capital. Renamed Istanbul, the city at the crossroads became a great center of Muslim culture and the capital of the Ottoman Empire.

Reading Check Why did Constantinople finally fall?



The Turks Take Constantinople

The Turks dragged some of their ships overland and launched them into Constantinople's harbor. **Synthesize** From what you know about the city's fortifications, why was this a good strategy?

Section 1 Assessment

Key Terms

Review the key terms at the beginning of this section. Use each term in a sentence that explains its meaning.

Target Reading Skill

What was your purpose for reading this section? Did you accomplish it? If not, what might have been a better purpose?

Comprehension and Critical Thinking

1. (a) **Locate** Where was Constantinople located?

(b) **Identify Effects** How did its location contribute to its growth and to the strength of the Byzantine Empire?

2. (a) **Recall** What qualities made Justinian a good and successful ruler?

(b) **Draw Conclusions** Why was Justinian's Code so important?

3. (a) **Explain** What was the dispute that split the medieval Christian church?

(b) **Draw Conclusions** Why might that split have weakened the empire?

Writing Activity

Write a letter to a friend or family member from the point of view of a foreign merchant traveling to Constantinople during the reign of Justinian. Describe the city and its location as well as what you have heard about the emperor.

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